

FACTS-AT-A-GLANCE

California Dependency Courts

Foster Care Background

- There are nearly 80,000 children in foster care in California.
- Just over half of the children in foster care have been in care for over two years.ⁱ

Dependency Court Hearings

- All children who enter or leave foster care come before a dependency court to determine if they will be removed from their home and placed in foster care, if they will reunify with their parents, and where and when they will have a permanent home.
- The case of each child in foster care is before a judge at least four times. Children in foster care for longer than a year experience at least two more appearances for each year they are in care.
- In 2004, the average time spent in a single hearing was approximately 10 to 15 minutes per case, well below recommended guidelines.ⁱⁱ
- Courts struggle to meet statutory hearing timelines: in a recent study fewer than 25% of cases completed the jurisdictional hearing within 15 days of the detention hearing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Judges, Attorneys, and Caseloads

- There are fewer than 150 judicial officers presiding over California's entire dependency court system.^{iv}
- The average caseload per full-time dependency judicial officer is approximately 1,000.^v
- Many judicial officers serve a relatively short period in dependency court. The average length of service is 2.8 years.^{vi}
- Nearly 75% of judicial officers have prior professional experience in juvenile matters, usually as attorneys in juvenile court.^{vii}
- Attorney caseloads in California counties range from a low of 131 to a high of 616. The average caseload statewide is 272, almost double the state recommended 141 clients per attorney. The optimal caseload is 76.^{viii}

Court Programs and Facilities

- Several state programs assist children and families through the court process.
 - ✓ About 10% of the children in foster care have a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) who provides critical information about a specific child to a judge, enhancing the decision-making process.^{ix}
 - ✓ Courts in 22 counties have juvenile dependency mediation programs that help resolve contested issues in a non-adversarial way.^x
 - ✓ There are dependency drug courts in 26 counties to assist substance abusing parents in reunifying and/or maintaining custody of their children at home.^{xi}
- Most California dependency courts do not have a designated place where children and families can meet with their attorneys or wait for their hearings.

Sources:

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- ⁱ *Child Welfare Services Report for California, Needell B. et al; 2004.*
 - ⁱⁱ *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, June 2005 (does not include trials).*
 - ⁱⁱⁱ *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, June 2005.*
 - ^{iv} *Juvenile Court Judicial Officers, 2006 Summary Data, Administrative Office of the Court, Center for Families, Children and the Courts.*
 - ^v *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007.*
 - ^{vi} *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families.*
 - ^{vii} *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families.*
 - ^{viii} *Dependency Counsel Caseload Study and Service Delivery Model Analysis, June 2004; prepared for the Administrative Office of the Courts; by The American Humane Association Denver, Colorado; the Spangenberg Group, West Newton, Massachusetts.*
 - ^{ix} *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007.*
 - ^x *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007.*
 - ^{xi} *Private Communication, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Court Improvement Project, March 2007.*